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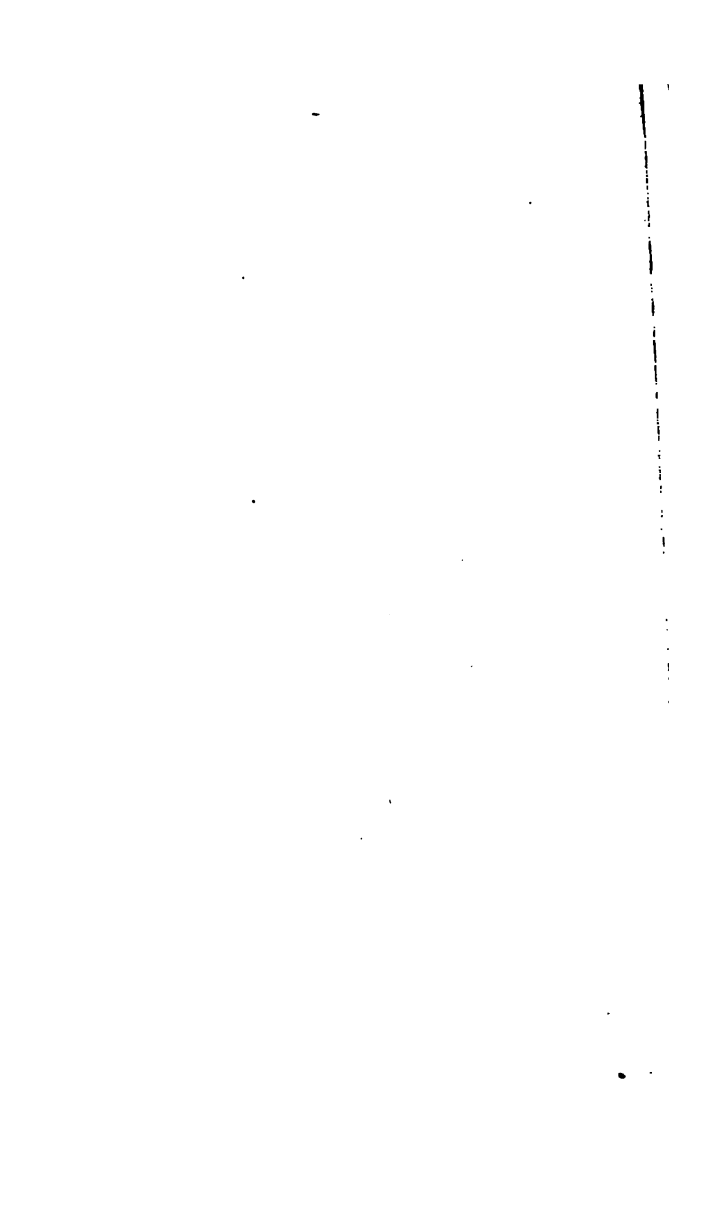
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THE QUEEN
OF THE
HOLLY BUSH

1489. f. 203b









THE

QUEEN OF THE HOLLY BUSH.

THE
QUEEN OF THE HOLLY BUSH

CHRISTMAS SKETCHES.

BY

THE REV. A. W. HALLEN, B.A.

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TO THE
RECTOR AND INHABITANTS
OF REDMARLEY D'ABITOT,
WORCESTERSHIRE,
IN GRATEFUL RECOLLECTION OF MUCH KINDNESS
RECEIVED, BOTH IN WORD AND DEED,
This little Work
IS
RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED.





INTRODUCTION.



THE Christmas hearth, the Christmas cheer, '
The kindly face, the warm right hand,
And, echoing over all the land,
The wild bells sounding on mine ear,—

All these I love ; nay, more, I feel
They all are utterings of one voice,
Given to make the heart rejoice,
And I adore Love sent to heal.

The spray of holly on the wall,
Looks down upon me year by year ;
Green are its leaves, whilst brown and sear
Gay summer leaves in each blast fall.

Oh time of youthful merriment !
Oh time of joy to middle age !
Oh time for peaceful thoughts t' engage
The old man's heart, with deep content.

Welcome again each merry game
Of children round the blazing fire,
The shouts and romps that never tire
In the bright glancing of the flame.

And welcome open-handed love,
Flowing for brethren,—all mankind
Rejoicing, some good work to find ;
Remembering who came from above.

Ye singers, carolling by night,
Welcome your ballads quaint and rude,
The burden of them, understood,
Is—" Glory, peace, and great delight."

If in these short and trivial tales
Some joy of Christmastide be found ;
If they but faintly give the sound
Of the loud love-song which prevails,

I am content. For memory oft,
By some soft whisper, is renewed ;
The wide-spread landscape, rightly viewed,
Gains beauty from each shrub and croft.

And if some dark scenes are portrayed,
Marring a time of joy and peace,
So must it be till sin shall cease,
And in full light all sorrow fade.

Only let each do well his part
Of love to man and love to heaven,
And Christmas gladness will be given—
True Christmas merriment of heart.



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THE
QUEEN OF THE HOLLY BUSH.

I AM the Queen of the Holly Bush, and dwell amidst its prickly boughs ; and every year, as Christmas draws nigh, I call together my attendant spirits and give to them the charge of a ruby-circled spray, bidding them watch over it in its Christmas home, and bring me word again of what they have seen. As the day approaches the goodliest sprays are cut off and borne away—sometimes by men coming from some distant town, sometimes by blithesome children from the nearest village. I am always glad when they come first, for I hear merrier and happier stories from country houses than

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from the crowded streets. This year many a joyous party came and chose out all my best branches, and, dividing the spoil, hurried away with laughter, and I was left alone, save that here and there a few berries were left on the topmost boughs, and the spirits who remained with them called to the birds of heaven, and told them that a Christmas banquet was ready for them, and they hopped around me and promised me blithe carols, when in the spring I should put forth all my young shoots. At length one by one the spirits came back, and told me what they had seen of good or ill, from their hiding places in amongst the holly berries.





THE CHURCH.



THE first came from the old village church, and thus he spake:—I was carried away and left on the school-room floor, till gentle fingers made my red berries the centre of a star, and put me up above the pulpit, and I heard one whisper to another, “Lo, that is the Star of Bethlehem;” and the lights died fast away, and the steps passed out of the church, and I thought on the old shepherd who often came early in the dark mornings to the hill to tend his sheep, and I wondered whether I should see him before me in the old church, and whether he would pray to the Good Shepherd; and then the bells in the old tower sang Christmas songs to one another in gentle chimes, so that I just caught the echo as it

came wandering down the long aisle, and it sounded like the distant voices of the angels singing softly, with a joy they knew not yet the meaning of. And then the old bells swung round and round, and with one glad shout told to all the land the glad tidings of great joy. Lo, now the angels had learnt their carol, and were sounding forth the glad words, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men." And so the hours fled by—and I saw the shepherd I had thought of come in with the congregation, but he seemed not to have heard the angels in the silent night; he was thinking of many things and they were troubling him, but he was not thinking of the one thing which would have brought him peace, and when the voice of his little daughter swelled forth—

"Hark, the herald angels sing,"

he, poor shepherd, heard no angels but only the "grinding mill-wheel" of his restless heart, and the parson came and stood beneath me, and he looked at the shepherd as he spake these words: "There were shepherds abiding

in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night," and the shepherd looked up, for he thought he was spoken to, and so he was; the parson did not cease to speak to him, but talked to him about his sheep till he grew attentive and listened. And then he told him of a certain very good shepherd who was a pattern to all others, and he told him what this shepherd did for the sheep. And then he told him how wilful the sheep were, and how they strayed, but how He was ever seeking them. And the poor shepherd learned how that, instead of being a good shepherd, he had been a wandering sheep, so that he felt that he might say what the parson told him he should say when he wished to come to the good shepherd, "I have gone astray like a sheep that is lost." And then when the sermon was ended, and the little maiden again sang—

" While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around,"

he felt that some of the glory was shining on him and he went forth a better man; and I heard up above the church roof a fresh peal of song from the multitude of angels, "for there is joy amongst the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."





THE INN.

THE next spirit that came was very sad, for its beautiful spray was trodden under foot, and there had been no happy Christmas for it. It had gone to the village inn, and sparkled in the window as the bright fire gleamed on its polished leaves. As evening drew near, the room was filled, and all were cheerful and contented, and the holly spray was happy at their gladness ; but ere long they talked not as men talk who have reason, many black words were often repeated, and then a child came in and was bid sing a carol, and he obeyed, for his own father bade him. And the child sang, and the men scoffed, and the two sounds for awhile kept separate, like the blue Rhone and the muddy

Arve; but the voice of the singer waxed fainter and fainter; and I saw that the father was leading him into the sty in which he himself dwelt, and then he bid him sing again words that none should hear. But a more merciful Father was caring for him, and from the evil of the impure word he was saved by the cup which he could not refuse, and I sighed for some one to come into that room and say, "Whoso offendeth one of these little ones that believeth in me, it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the depths of the sea." And the poor child was thrust into the manger, and there he rested, for the babe of the manger loved him. Noisy grew the company, high words passed, and blows were exchanged, still the cup went round, and the night was getting darker. The moon had sunk behind the church tower, and the stars hid themselves behind the clouds, and the clouds wept over that house, and the blast ground the boughs of the trees together, till it sounded like "wailing and gnashing of teeth," out in the outer darkness. And I saw one pass by the

window ; cold and shivering were her limbs, tearful her eyes, and sad her face, and her voice was low with much weeping, and she stood and waited in the rain and cold for one whom she loved, but who thought not on her, and I wondered how she had strength to stand in the biting winter night ; and I wondered how she had patience to wait through the long sad hours. But I saw One standing by her side, His feet were wet with the dews of the mountain, and He stood without in the cold, and by his strength upbore that woman, and His name was Love. Very majestic was He in His sorrow, on His brow the crown of glory shone, but He had twined sharp thorns about it. In His eye were majesty and power, but love and pity dwelt there too, and He was listening, oh ! how eagerly, as He knocked at the door, and I knew the form of Him who hath said—

“ Behold I stand at the door and knock.”

And I wondered no more, for I knew that He was ever knocking at the door of the sinner's heart, yet I trembled for those who would not

let Him in, while He knocked in *love*. And He led the mother to the manger, and giving her her boy, sent her to her home, happier far in her very woe than those revellers in their merriment. And they sang louder, and lost the appearance of men, and I could scarce hear the patient watcher knocking. At length my bough was torn from its place and trampled under foot, and I gladly left the sinful place.





THE MANOR-HOUSE.

NEXT came several spirits who had been at the Manor-house, some in one room, some in another, and they all brought their little histories. I, said one, sat on the edge of a marble vase, in which my spray was placed—the room was lighted up, and the servants came in and out bearing dishes of many sorts of food. Soon the large doors swung open, and an assembled family entered the room. The old squire was there, and all his children about him ; a happy man looked he, and indeed he was happy ; sorrow he had known, as who has not ? but his sorrow had brought forth joy. The tenants found him a good landlord, the poor a kind friend, the young a sympathizing adviser, and joyous was he that

Christmas evening as he looked round the table, and a merry twinkle was in his eye, as he saw how the cousins had paired off together, and how they pretended to be unconscious of his smile ; near him was his youngest son, a merry middy, whose delight was in plaguing a stately guardsman, his eldest brother : on he rattled, joke after joke, story after story, till the old gentleman brimmed over with mirth ; then there was the guardsman, he did not look like the prodigal in the parable, yet in his own way he was coming home to his father, though his confessions of transgression had been but awkwardly spoken, still he had resolved to vex the old man no more by his extravagant habits, and he had resolved to come and show that he loved his old home, but he could not help feeling stiff and stately, and his heart was not so readily opened to Christmas love as in "Auld lang syne ;" it never occurred to him to offer to help his sisters when they decked up the church, whereas the little middy was invaluable, clambering long ladders with long trailing festoons, and in sheer forgetfulness

shouting forth nautical phrases, as though he were up in the rigging, and then awkwardly endeavouring to excuse his thoughtlessness; how much happier was he than his big brother, who was inwardly despising all the nonsense. Again, there was the young barrister; how thoroughly he enjoyed his Christmas holiday! how gladly he flung aside his law, and wrote home, inquiring about horses, guns, and dogs; he had walked from the station because he knew a short way across the fields, and he wanted to see how the game was getting on, and as he squashed along the boggy fields he saw the polish of London disappear off his boots, nor did he grieve over it, the polish of the heart was safe, and that was better than London polish. But I chiefly noticed the two lovers, the squire's young daughter and her distant cousin, they were making the most of Christmas day, and were getting more inured to the jokes which the squire heaped upon them. I know who was pledged silently but heartily when the glass was put to the lips—I know who chose the dishes that were before him who sat by her side. We

spirits see very deep into what is going on, but we don't betray all our secrets ; after awhile the little grandchildren came in, and drank papa's and grandpapa's health, and chose out those of their uncles and aunts from whom they expected most attention and dessert ; the little middy found plenty of work to do, cutting up oranges, and making mice out of apple pips, brewing orange juice and water, and passing it off as grog, and attempting yarns when he had tested the credulity of his auditors ; and here again I pitied the guardsman, he tried to tempt a golden-haired little niece, but no ! she would not leave merry uncle Charley, and the prodigal returned to feed upon his own thoughts ; but it was dull work when the ladies left us, the impatient lover would gladly have followed them, and seizing hold of my poor spray, tossed the shining berries one by one into the blazing fire. The middy and his lawyer brother planned shooting expeditions for the holidays, and the squire proceeded with the work of forgiveness. Ah, prodigal ! your heart must warm while that bright cheery old man is

with you ; he tells you his plans, he talks of the days of his youth, and you find that he had his temptations, he half confesses that he was once a prodigal, and you have hope ; you try and recollect old names, and cheer the old man's heart by shewing interest, assumed at first, but real afterwards, in all his plans and wishes. And then they pass away, and I promise them as they go, a happy new year.

I, said another spirit, was in the drawing-room. A beautiful girl had twined my spray into the gilt frame of a lovely picture, a face like her own, but older, was painted on the canvas ; there was a clear and cheerful light in the eyes which seemed to follow all the movements of the happy party, and I soon saw that it was the portrait of the mother, for though now she was much older looking, there was the freshness of a happy life still left in her eye and her smiling mouth, and she put her arm round the fair girl's waist as they stood by the bright fire-and spake words of kindness and of love, and the maiden laughed and blushed, and then bent her head

on her mother's shoulder and wept a few happy tears. She was thinking how welcome Christmas would be to her in coming years when she should sometimes visit the old fire-side with her husband ; and her elder sister was now gathering her little ones round her knee, and telling them in gentle voice of the little babe who had been born that day so many hundred years ago, and then she opened the piano, and sang simple carols, and her sister joined her voice in with the uncertain singing of the children, and so full were they of song that they heard not the door open and the others come in. Then the cousins joined their voices, and the middy bore his part in the old tunes he had often hummed out on the deep, dark sea-watches on Christmas nights, and the prodigal felt his lips moving under his moustache, and his little niece, when she heard him singing, took hold of his hand timidly, and he felt it was good to be loved by little children. As the carol ended, another sounded on their ears, it was ruder, and some of the words maybe were sad nonsense, but it was being sung heartily out in the frosty

night, and from the outer air came mellowed and musical, and the window was opened, and the little band came forward, five or six girls, and three or four men, their fathers, and they took up the strain again, and the hearty sound burst into the room, and was taken up there ; and all, high and low, rich and poor, praised God for that gift which was sent for all, and the prodigal went forth, and spoke to the men, and remembered their names, and liked the open look on their rough faces, and gave them a Christmas offering, with such words as they had not heard from him for many a day, for the young squire was always thought proud, and then they were sent round to the servants' hall to spend a merry hour before they went home to rest on that happy Christmas night ; and the windows were again shut, and the little ones went to bed, their mother taking them that Christmas night, that she might think of a mother who had watched the cradle on a Christmas night long long ago. And the two lovers went to the quiet recess, and sat and whispered to each other awhile, and looked forward into the opening years, and their

voices were so very low that they could scarce hear each other speak, so they put their heads close together, and the middy afterwards produced a spray of mistletoe, which he declared he had found in the recess, but who knows whether he did not put it there ; and the old man laughed, and asked why they had not mistletoes now as they used to have in his young days, and the middy told of the large one John had cut for the servants' hall, and thither they all went, and when they came back, there were the few solemn words of prayer, and a father's and mother's blessing rested on bright heads, and I too wished them a happy new year.





THE NAVVY'S COTTAGE.

THEN came a spirit from quite a distant part of the village. A spray of holly had dropped from the baskets of the merry children, and had lain neglected in the road, till a poor woman came along with her basket on her arm from the shop and she picked it up, and looking at it tenderly, put it in her basket, and then her mind dwelt on happier days, and she thought on the village school, and her own youth, and her parents, and the minister, and how the bells must be ringing in the old church she used to sit in. And she remembered, oh how bitterly ! that she had not been to church on Christmas day for eight or nine years ; and as she passed the school-house, she heard within happy singers,

and the old carol was sung, and gentle voices were there, and a rich and mellow voice kept them together in harmony, and she leant against the rails, and joined in the song that so reminded her of old days. And while she was thus lowly singing to herself, she did not notice that some one had come and was standing beside her, waiting till she left the gateway, that he might go into the school. He did not see her face, but he heard the voice of sorrow, and that the song was like a long forgotten melody.

And he said in a low kind voice, "would you like to go in and see them making the church wreaths, and then you can join their singing, and it is very cold to stand without the door?"

And she said, "Oh sir, I am not worthy."

"Nay my friend, do not refuse; you will find comfort with children's voices."

But again she answered, "I am not worthy."

"But come and stand within the porch, and tell me the carol you like best, and they, if they know it, shall sing it, and shall not know you are there."

"Thank you, sir; I am not worthy, yet I will come."

And she thought of an old carol that her mother had taught her, and the children sang it, and in the half light the poor creature dropped on her knees, and the words she still said, were, "I am not worthy," and then she arose and hurried away, ere the clergyman came back to speak words of comfort to her, and she was lost in the dark night. She left the village far behind, and walked over the common to a nest of small mud-built houses on the side of an unfinished railway, and into one of these she entered, and put her purchases in a box, but stuck the holly spray in the ill-glazed window; the youngest children had been put to bed by a neighbour, and the eldest boy was still out with his father, so she sat awhile over the fire and thought. She wished she had waited to hear the kind man speak again. Why had not she stopped to thank him? and then she began singing one of the old carols again, and as she sang she lifted up her face and poured out the words and went on, till she again was caught. A

tall navvy had come into the cabin carelessly at first, but when he heard her singing he paused and looked astonished, and coming up to her, said—

“Why, Mary, it’s long since I heard ye singing like that. What’s come to thee, lass?”

And she looked up in his face and did not speak. She loved John Smith the navvy, and yet she feared him, for his strength was that of a giant’s, and his passions scarce more restrained than those of some giants we read of; but she saw that in his face that made her gain confidence.

“I heard them singing at school, John, as I came along, and it minded me of old days, John. And the minister spake kind to me, John; and oh, them old songs.”

“You havn’t been begging to the minister, Mary! eh? We want no rich man’s gifts here, here’s two hands ’ill feed thee, Mary, and the young uns, and pretty soon clear out any whining parson if I catch him here; so mind that, lass. I am an honest man, and get on well enough without any parsons spying round me.”

"But, John, I didn't beg. I was but coming by the school and heard 'em singing, and stood to listen, and the minister came up and asked me in out of the cold, and asked me what song I liked, and bade the children sing it."

John here opened his eyes, and then broke out into a laugh, oh, oh, oh! "The parson asked you in and told ye to choose a song, eh. Oh Lord! why my lady, thou art coming to honour, 'twas lucky for him he did treat you civil, if he hadn't, I'd ha' stood no nonsense from him, parson or not. But what are they making all this rout about to-night. To-morrow's Christmas day, I know, and there's no work and no pay neither, as if one day in the week wasn't enough to rob an honest man of."

"Well, John, wash thyself up while I set the supper ready, and I'll try and remember all about it, and tell ye. Oh dear! I was taught it all at school."

"There you are with your school again; it's everlasting school with you, plaguing my life out to send the young 'uns to school. I never went to school, and I get on well enough, *I count.*"

So John clenched his argument, much in the same fashion that many do who have been to school, and therefore ought to know better. While he was eating his supper, his wife began—

“John, I’ve remembered most all about it, there was once in Bethlehem, somewhere out in other countries, a child born one Christmas night, and the angels, that is, dead children, John, no not that neither, but sort of spirits, there ain’t none like them now, at least I’ve never seen them; well these angels came in the sky and sang to some shepherds that were out looking after their sheep in the night, and told them to go and see the child that had been born, I remember the words well enough—

“ While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.

“ Fear not, said he, for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind,
Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind.”

And this child was called Jesus; and he grew up, and was killed; and we ought to pray to Him; and oh, John, I never do, and I wanted to to-night when I heard those children singing about him."

"Well," said John, who had grown somewhat attentive, "I count it is one of your women's stories. I never heard of it. Why don't these angels come now? I've never seen 'em when we been minding the ballast fires."


"I don't know, John; but will you go to church with me to-morrow, and we'll hear all about it."

"Not I, indeed. If I must rest I will rest. What's the good of going all across the common there to be stared at by all them poor, mean-spirited fellows. I hate 'em all; they've not got the spirits of a navvy; at least none have I've ever met with, and I count these are much the same—" (for John and his mates had only come to this place some three days).

"Well, then, John, may I go and take the girl along with me."

"And who's to cook my dinner, I'd like to know?"

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“ Very well, John, I’ll not wish—but I used to go years ago, and I’d have liked to go once more.”

“ I never said you should not go, did I? I don’t see no harm in it; only make thyself up smart-like, and don’t let ’em think that ye want to beg from ’em; and hold up your head among ’em, Mary, for you are worth all of ’em put together,” and John gave Mary a smacking kiss, and looked at her with pride, and she, poor body, unused to such kindness, began to cry for joy; and John, in deep disgust, said, “ There, that’s the way with all you women folk—its one everlasting cry, cry.”

So in the morning Mary walked across the common in the clear and frosty air; and forgetting John’s injunction to hold up her head, found a quiet corner in the church, and heard all about the Good Shepherd; and wished that her girl could sing like those up in the chancel; and then walked home again, and found John had cooked the dinner himself, and was proud of his work, for though a mate’s wife had offered to help him, he said he would get on right well alone, and shew

his old woman he could do without her. And then she told him all about the shepherds; and he said "'twas pretty talk, but he'd have liked it better if it had been about navvies, for they were the better men any day."

"But, perhaps," said she, "the minister don't know about the navvies."

"No; nor no need he should," quoth John.


"Then he can't preach about them."

"He wouldn't if he did; but if he comes near me I'll try and speak him civil, because he know'd how to behave to you, Mary, and wasn't ignorant-like, as the rest of 'em is. But he'd better not begin at me about the shepherds, 'cause then I'll tell him my mind pretty plainly like." And so I, the spirit of the holly, found some Christmas joy, and I waited to see where it would end.

A day or two after, when John came in at night, he looked mighty important, and said—

"Mary, I've seen your parson-man, and he's not such a bad chap either. We were working in the cutting, and he came along with a little hammer in his hand, knocking off

a bit of stone here and there, and one of my mates says, pretty loud like — ‘I say, John, yon chap wouldn’t earn no cheese to his bread at that rate ;’ and says I—‘ He don’t want to ; his bread’s ready buttered for him.’ By that he had come up to us, and bid us good-day, civil like, and told us the rock was hardish-like. I said, ‘ Yes ; it didn’t want no telling to find out that, for I’d broken my pick at it.’ He laughed at that quite pleasant-like, and said, ‘ you’d best have it mended soon then, friend, for there’s a deal sight harder rock before you yet.’ So I saw he know’d something about it, and I said the engineer’s men had told us that ; and he kept on chipping off a bit here and there like, and putting ’em into his pocket ; so I laughed and said, ‘ I wish he’d take that big stone out of our way, as he seemed to have a fancy for ’em. He laughed, and said the biggest things weren’t always best ; and there he’s true, mind you. So one of my mates, not seeing that he was as sharp as we were, asked him to try his hand with the pick. ‘ All right,’ says he ; ‘ I’ll try your tools and you shall try mine ; that’s fair.’



‘Done,’ says I; ‘that’s fair. I know what you’re up to; you’re the man my missus went to hear the other day. I am glad to see you know something about navvies as well as shepherds, which are people I’ve no opinion of myself.’ Well, he laughed at that, and he didn’t make a bad show with the pick either. He got his coat off, and seemed to know where to hit, so that he didn’t waste many blows, for you know, Mary, it all depends if you hit a stone in the right place. By the time he’d done we were off to the smithy to dinner, so he cries out, ‘Now, I’m to have my part of the bargain.’ ‘That’s all fair,’ says I; so says he, ‘I’ll come and take dinner with you, if you have not objection.’ ‘Glad to see you,’ says I. So he pulled out a lump of bread and cheese, and says, ‘I’ve earned my cheese this time, and aint got no butter on my bread either.’ So we laughed, for we knew that he had heard us chaffing about him. Well, he was very sociable like; talked about different parts, for he’d been most over all England. And then we told him where we came from; and it was pleasant to hear him talk of the old

places; and he knew something about the father of one of the young chaps, and didn't say anything about the shepherds. And we told him, when we went back to work, he was welcome to look in on us any time if he chose; and he shook hands, and paid his footing handsome; and says he to me—'You come with your missus next Sunday, and you shan't hear nothing about the shepherds; but I'll tell you something about the navigators, and I won't give no such bad account of 'em either; and it will be a longish walk for the missus, so you'll take a bit of dinner with me. Come,' says he, 'a bargain's a bargain. If you won't, I won't eat my bread and cheese with you any more;' so you'd better look up, Molly, for I promised him I'd come."

On Sunday morning John and Mary left the youngest children with a neighbour, and, taking the girl started off; and the minister did tell them about the navvies, and about making railroads, and how they filled up the hollow places, and cut down the hills, and made a straight and level way; and then he said there was a great deal of ignorance in every man's

heart, rich and poor, and that that ought to be filled up with knowledge, not book learning exactly, but knowing about God, which was knowledge enough for any man, for that no one could know enough about it ; and then he told them how there were things that must be cut away, how that a drunkard must cut drink away, how that the swearer must cut oaths away, and so on ; and then told them that all this must be done not only to make men happier in this world, but that there was another world that the railroad was leading to, and there the line was all marked out, and that a man had gone over it all, and knew all about how hard the work was, and that he was the paymaster, and would make every allowance, and then he told them that heaven was the end, and that Jesus had felt all their hardships, and that he was the baby who had been born in the manger ; and at the end of the sermon he told the people that the church would be open on New Year's eve, and he asked them all to come and make a good start for the new year. And when service was over, he called John and Mary into his house, and *made them sit down*, and put the girl by his

side, and gave them plenty of good meat and beer, and afterwards talked to John, and asked him to come again on the New Year's night, and John said he'd send the young un's to school, for he'd like them to read though he couldn't; and as they were going away the parson gave Mary a bible, and they went home comfortable enough. And on New Year's night John again came, and before the service was ended, determined he would make a new start for the new year ; and he and the parson had a talk about things, and it was a happy New Year to the strong-limbed navvy and his wife, and she put up the sprig of holly safe, for it reminded her, she says, of standing at the school-house gate, and hearing the carols sung.

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THE VILLAGE SCHOOL.

THE next spirit had been watching the children in the school-house. Large bundles of evergreens were carried in thither on Christmas eve. The bigger girls were entrusted with the care of all the good sprays, from which they made long festoons, which, as they were finished, were laid side by side on the floor till they could be put up in the church. The little ones gathered up the berries which were knocked off, and strung them together, so that they might be twisted round and round the wreaths. The minister and two ladies were covering designs wherewith to ornament the chancel, and the merry midshipman was carrying the garlands as they were finished, into the church. Very cheerful was

the room, with the candles round the walls, and a fire blazing in the open stove, and the children so happy with that peculiar Christmas happiness of childhood, which comes back again, only so much fainter, in after life. On the wall was a print of the manger of Bethlehem, and under it had been fastened a scroll with these words, "Unto us a child is born." And the girls had got leave to make a little garland to put round the picture, and they chose out my spray, and put it in the centre over the picture. Then the mistress, with a clear sweet voice, began a carol, and the children took it up in different parts of the room, and sang as they worked, and there was a rustling of leaves, and a swift moving of neat hands, and bright eyes were everywhere. Up in one corner sat three girls all busy at one festoon, one was gathering out the sprays, another arranging them, while the third twined the string round them. When the singing was over, I noted they were very busy talking.

"Oh, I should like to be going with the carol singers! but father wouldn't let me, because uncle John ain't going this year, and

I was to have gone along with him, and I shall have left school by next year, for sister Jane is going out to service next month, and I shall have to look after the little ones, and do for father, oh dear! oh dear! I had my mother last Christmas, and now she's gone, and I must leave the school, and I ain't got strength for it, and yet I want to do well, and feel proud like that father should trust me, but I know he'll be cross before long with me," and the poor thing cried a little quietly. And just then the midday came to see how the festoon was getting on, and said—

"What's the matter Polly; pricked your fingers?"

And one of them answered, "Please, sir, she's crying 'cause she's lost her mother."

And he said, "Well Polly, don't cry at Christmas time," and he spoke so cheerily, that she looked up and smiled, and went on briskly with her work.

Poor Polly, it would be her last Christmas eve of garland making; her mother had died in the spring, and her elder sister, who had left her place to look after the children, was

going out again to service, and the father was going to try whether Polly could keep house for him and manage the children ; as she was growing up a likely girl enough. He did not mean to be hard on her, but there were many trials in store ; he was not always in the best temper when he came home at night, and the children wouldn't mind her as they had her sister. Ah ! Polly, try and do your best, girl, and you'll have happiness deeper and more lasting than twining holly sprays which will be withered in a few days—you have now to learn to twine young hearts and keep them fresh and pure, and to do that you must keep your own fresh and pure. Nearer the table was a very pretty child who was bringing sprays to the ladies, and whom they noticed more than seemed wise ; they did not see what I saw, that the little thing was vain and forward, and that she had been told by a foolish mother how pretty she was, and I thought on her future life, and saw that she was going the way to have but few happy childish Christmas eves. I saw a dark picture in the future. Ah Rose ! Rose ! why couldn't you keep the place the ladies have got for you ?


you wish to better yourself, and get to London, and wear fine clothes, and all this you do ; larger wages, finer clothes, and streets all round you, and temptations all round you too ; and I see, but it is years away yet, a poor creature in such fine clothes and such a pretty face,—but oh, how wretched beneath its laughter, and it is the same Rose, but a poor blighted, withered Rose, and she sees the gay shops with bunches of holly in them, and she remembers the school-room on Christmas eve, and she weeps in her weary walk up and down, in and out amongst hearts almost as hard as the pavement beneath her feet.

Ah Rose ! when will it end ? and yet farther on I see the same Rose, but the blight is being pruned out, she will never be the same gay wild Rose as in years gone by, but she may yet bloom in the garden of paradise ; and again in the refuge she is twining holly wreaths, and again she is singing a Christmas carol—

Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.

But, alas, how many Roses are there who

never again learn to sing their old Christmas carols, but go to their death, which seems to them, in their ignorance and woe, an uncertain escape from certain misery. And now the door opens, and the minister comes in with a kind word and look for all, and he asks them to sing an old carol, and when it is ended goes out for an instant, and returns looking sad. And the little children do not know that they have been blessing a poor weary-hearted woman. But I saw the navy's wife as she knelt in the dark porch. But I had forgotten the school-mistress, "governess," as the girls call her; but it is not such a pleasant word as the good old "school-mistress." Christmas is a time of great rejoicing to her, and she needs it—the rest, the cheerfulness, the sound of merry voices—her's is hard work, and oftentimes meets with but little thanks; she has many trials with those who will not let her do them good. Many are the girls whom she has seen leave the school, and felt that they were not fitted to face the temptation that surrounded them. She would willingly keep them for her friends,



but they oftentimes seem but too anxious to escape from her presence; and now she is thinking of a happy Christmas circle many miles away, and wishing she could join them, for her father and mother are yet living at the old shop at home, and her married brother with them. But she went forth to earn her bread, and can only afford to go and see them in the summer; so when others are out in the bright corn-fields, she is sitting in the close little back parlour. And now when she knows that the little back parlour is full of mirth, she must remain amid the muddy lanes; and her old aunt, to whom she has given a home, is oftentimes impatient, and is hard on the poor tired mistress. Yet she is very happy to-night, and has been happy all day; and several of her pupils have brought her little Christmas offerings for the morrow, such as their parents could spare, and though their value is but small, such little offerings are rich in winning love. And the young ladies are very kind, and they talk of a Christmas tree in the next week, and the work goes merrily on till it is time to send the children

to their homes, and they sing an evening hymn, and go forth expectant of the morrow. And the mistress picks out some sprays and decks up her little parlour. And the school-house is dark.

The school-house has but a dull time of it on Christmas day, it only sees the children, with their rosy faces, a little while before church; and the singers try over the Christmas hymns, and bid good-bye to the school till the week's holiday is over. Once in that week is the silence broken; they all crowd in with their parents to see the magic lanthorn—treat to old and young. First come views of places they have heard of—Windsor Castle, where the Queen lives: or wonderful scenes from foreign lands, and they are lost in wonder. The little ones sitting with eyes, oh, so open, and gaping with very astonishment. Then they sing some of their school songs; then comes the second part—and how they laugh, old men riding donkeys which *will* kick them off; cobblers with large noses working at the rate of a dozen pairs of shoes a day. Punch and Judy fighting, and Mr. Punch, inhuman mon-

ster, opening his mouth and swallowing the baby; which act of cannibalism he repeats over and over again, to the immense delight of the first row, who open their mouths wide enough to swallow their dolls, if they had them with them; but in lieu of those, content themselves with large rosy apples, which the middy produces from his capacious pockets. And then middy, concealed by the white sheets, is persuaded by his sister to sing a comic song, and how they laugh, old and young! Lumps of cake are handed round, while preparations are made for the third part, and the minister tells them he is going to shew them the places they have read of in the Bible, and describes how changed is that land which once flowed with milk and honey, and picture after picture passes before them. And they see the village of Bethlehem, and rude wild-looking men, looking most likely just as those shepherds looked 1860 years ago. And the minister tells them that the young squire has been to all these places, and the two sisters (who have tempted him away from his game of billiards), in whispers, ask him to tell the people all

about it; it would please them so much to hear from one who had been there; and he pooh poohs the notion, but at length begins, and remembering all his old feelings when he saw those sacred places, he warms up and tries to speak simply to the poor people, and tells them of the many sights he had seen in the Holy Land. And when he has done, he feels that he has been allowed to do his part towards making others happy, and the prodigal is happier than he would have been in his London club. And a few quiet words of peace are spoken, and the villagers stream out into the frosty starry night; and the children, looking up into the heavens, wonder whether the Star of Bethlehem was much larger than that great star which they see shining over their heads. All this the spirit of the holly spray had seen in the village school. And I, the Queen of the Holly Bush, rejoiced at hearing of the happiness of mortals, but remembered how once on a time the spirit of a spray which had been sticking in a school-room window, brought me very different tidings. Then there had been but little

mirth, but the school had been a place for hard drudgery and work, and the master thought not of his scholars' good but only of his own advancement: And I fear me, there are still such schools to be met with in this our land. But many there are where the days pass fairly, happily as they might in all—were all perfect—were all perfect. Ah! when will come

The golden prime,
Of good Haroun Alraschid?

I fear me I shall be dead and gone, and have bequeathed my sovereignty to some younger bush, which shall spring up from one of my bright red berries.





THE FARM-HOUSE.

FARMER BROWNING'S ploughboy came and cut off one of my goodliest boughs, and carried it down to the farm, together with a mighty mistletoe bush which he got in the orchard under the hill. The mistletoe was nailed up to the broad old beam in the large kitchen, and the holly was cut up into several sprigs, and laid by for use on the Christmas morrow; and as the night closed in, wheels were heard in the yard, and the farmer came in stamping and shaking himself out of his great coat, and behind him came two young men, one his son, one his nephew—the former a Londoner by adoption, the latter by birth; but both came to spend a merry Christmas at the old farm; two sons were living at home

and four daughters, their mother had long been dead. Soon the supper was brought in, and many were the questions asked on both sides, and the talk went round and round the room, and the Londoners had it all in their own hands that first night, and marvellous were the stories they told of the life in that great world, but the laugh was against them when they were an hour late the next morning, Christmas morning too, of all mornings, but they made a truce with many a little Christmas-box brought from London for the country cousins and sisters, and off they all started to church across the fields, for the frost made them hard and pleasant, and churchwarden Browning's seat made the goodliest show of any, the four girls, the four young men, and the hale old man. And then came the dinner, the good old English roast beef, and the mighty pudding with the sprigs of holly in them, and the servant girls had leave to spend the evening at their own homes, and carried good store of Christmas cheer with them, and were bid to send up the fiddler in the evening, and leave word at the upper farm, that the

Thomsons had better look in and have a dance. Now the Thomsons were six in number, and always ready to attend or give a dance, and were sure to come; and then some wine and the spirit bottles were put on the table, and the large yellow oranges, the rosy apples, and the brown filberts, and the old man asked for an old English song, and they all joined in; then the London cousin, who had a good voice, gave them new comic songs; and the London brother, who had been in Scotland, also sang some of those ballads, the finest of any age or any tongue, and the burden of one was—

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And the days of auld lang syne.

And the old man looked troubled, as the words sounded again and again in his ears. "The days of auld lang syne," and he leant back in his chair and thought on the days of auld lang syne. He remembered a Christmas forty years ago, when he was the guest, and he remembered a fair face in that old parlour, and how he whispered to her out there by the window, in the days of auld lang syne, and how

angry his father had been when he heard that he loved Annie, for there had been ill-will between the two old neighbours, and how he would not give her up, but married her, and when her father died, took the farm; and he remembered the day when they brought him word that his father, who had not spoken to him for two years, had been found dead by the road side, having been thrown from his horse. All this he thought on, for it had happened in the days of auld lang syne, and then years passed by, and his own son had married against his leave, and he had not spoken to him, and he lived but three miles off, and the old man felt sorrowful, and one of the girls asked them to sing the song again, and the question came home to him—

Should auld acquaintance be forgot?

And he told them he'd be back soon, and bid them dance and not wait for him, and he put on his great coat in the dark passage, and lighted the lanthorn and went to the stable and harnessed the old horse and put him into the phaeton, and drove out in the cold clear night, still thinking on the "auld lang syne," and

the voice of the carol singers reached his ear.

Goodwill to all mankind.


And he then remembered how that goodwill had been shewn in the days of auld lang syne, 1860 years ago, and so he mused till he reached a white farm gate, and drove to the house-door and knocked, and then knew not what he should say, and his son John came to open the door with a lighted candle in his hand, and looked hard at him, for he had not recognised him, and all the old man could think of was, a "merry Christmas, son John," and then they held their hands together as those who sealed long severed love, and he went into the parlour and said, "shake hands daughter ; I never kissed thee yet, and I won't till I do it in my own house, so put on your bonnet, and make haste, and bring the children along with thee." And when he got home, he left John to put the old horse up in the stable, and led his daughter-in-law into the kitchen, where they were all dancing, and putting her under the merry mistletoe bough, *kissed her in the sight of his children, and said,*

“now we’ll have a merry Christmas in right earnest,” and then the carol singers sang before the door—

Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.

And the door was opened, and they had as much supper as they could eat, remembering always that they were going to the squire’s, and must leave a corner for his good things, and the Christmas week passed merrily. The London cousin *would* try to shoot, but couldn’t, and also *would* try to make love and succeeded much better, and the London brother was laughed at by his country brothers, because he would not go with them to shoot, till at length he went, and found he remembered enough of his old cunning to do his share very fairly, and tire them well out. Then they told of the great review in London, and how they had seen the Queen, and that one of them had had the luck to be in the front rank, and then the secret came out that one of them, the London cousin, had brought his uniform down with him, and he had to

shew himself off in it, nothing loth, and it put the finishing stroke to his victory, and the love making at home, and shooting abroad, went on more furiously than ever; and one night that Christmastide they all went over to John's and had a dance, which lasted well-nigh till morning. And John having cut another mistletoe for his father's kitchen, carried off the old one, and saying he'd keep it as long as it would hold together, hung it up from his ceiling. And the old man was persuaded to dance with his daughter-in-law, though he hadn't danced for ever so many years, and the old people had a rubber of whist, and the young ones danced on and on, till it was noticed that the London cousin kept pretty true to one partner, so true that I verily believe it was all settled that night. All these things the spirit of the holly told me, having seen it herself, or having heard it on good authority. I trust the plough-boy will come to me next year, for I should like to hear again of old church-warden Browning, the merry girls, and the London *cousin*.






THE RECTORY.



THEN came a spirit from the old rectory, and a calm and peaceful Christmas he had seen—the Christmas of a life, near its close, when hopes of a better life are born, and the soul desires to be released. The rector had passed the age usually given to men. Ten years had gone by since he had seen the birthday which put him in the number of those who had lived fourscore years; yet his life was not all “labour and sorrow.” It was very calm and peaceful, as I, the spirit of the holly, looked down on the two old people, the rector and his wife, who was an old woman, though she was some fifteen years younger than her husband. The old man could not get out of doors now, except in summer, and the curate

had the charge of the parish, and knew that he should succeed in the rectory. In the evening a bright fire blazed in the grate, and the small table, with the dinner-cloth, was drawn near it, and the Christmas dinner began. The curate always dined with them on that day. He would have been welcomed at the table of well nigh every one of his parishioners on that day; but he preferred coming to the old rector, and learning from him a lesson how to live and how to die. The old man was merry as old men can be who have light hearts, and he recounted old stories of the parish seventy and eighty years ago, for he had lived in it before he had become rector; he was great-uncle to the squire at the manor-house. And then he grew tired and weary of talking, and leant back in his arm-chair, and was silent till he heard the carol singers outside; and he called them into the room, and bade three or four of the girls sing softly the old carols over to him, and then asked them their names, and told them how he remembered their grandmothers singing *carols*; and he spake kindly to the men,

and letting them take his white, weak hand in their rough horny ones, said, "Ah, friends, my hand-shaking days are gone, and *I* shall be gone before next Christmas. But tell the people to-night that I send them all a merry Christmas," and with many a deep and sincere "God bless you, sir," the carol singers left the room. Then the candles were put out, and they sat in the flickering light of the fire, till the curate, going to the small chamber organ, rambled over its keys, playing old airs, bits of Handel, that struck on the old man's soul, and so the evening passed. And ere it was late the servants and the Christmas visitors came in, and the old man spake to them. The clerk was there, a white-haired brisk old man, who yet felt himself a mere child before the rector, though he was looked up to as one of that notable family of oldest inhabitants. Others, too, were there, pensioners, who were made welcome on Christmas night, and heard words of kindness from the old man; and then they knelt down, and the curate read the prayers, and the old man, in voice feeble and low, gave them his blessing, and they de-



parted. One of the servants had, for some reason or other, carried my spray away out of the room into the kitchen when prayers were done, and so I spent the rest of the evening with the old man's guests, and heard them tell their tales sitting round the big fire while the cook was putting supper on the table, and two old men—the clerk and the village carpenter—puffing at their long clay pipes, talked in low voices to each other. Quoth the clerk—

“How hearty the old gentleman seemed to-night. Lord! he's a wonderful man. Most men are childish at his age, and yet he's as sensible as I am. But I doubt me if we shall see him another Christmas. Why, he's been rector here this sixty-two years next May, and that's a good time—ain't it, neighbour?”

“Well, now, I didn't think he was so fresh like as he was last week. He seemed to me like sunk a good deal, and every day tells on a man of his age. Besides, I don't think he'll last long—I don't like men talking about their coffins.”

“Talking about their coffins!—why, what *do you mean?*”

“ Why, you know that last month the wind blew down the big elm in the glebe field. Well, the rector sends for me, and says, ‘ Richard, I shall die before you, I fancy, though you ain’t so young as you used to be, and I want you to make my coffin yourself ; I’d rather you’d do it than a stranger ; and there’s the old elm will do for it,’ and then he laughed like, and said, ‘ I nearly earned a coffin in that same tree, Richard, about eighty years ago, for I fell out of it in getting a rook’s nest. But now the tree’s down before me, and you’re welcome to the tree just as it is, only you must make my coffin of it, and three or four more,’ and he gave me the names writ down on a bit of paper ; and, William, yours is down.”

“ There now, don’t be talking to me of my coffin anyways at Christmas night, Richard. Can’t you find anything better to talk of ?”

“ I was only a saying,” said Richard, “ that his ordering his coffin looked like his not lasting another year—at least *I* think so.”

And supper was ready, and it being a great occasion, the clerk, in his official capacity, took

upon him to say grace, and made the most of it too ; and then, with great politeness, he assisted cook to do the honours of the table, remarking " it was unlucky she had put the mistletoe just over it, for there the only couple who could make use of it were the roast ducks ; but then if she had put it anywhere else, he could have found a duck worth the kissing ;" whereat the cook told him to take his quacking somewhere else. " She'd like his misses to hear him going on so." And soon the old rectory was silent, and I, the spirit of the holly branch, have come to tell you what I have seen, but I must return again, for I would see the old man once more, and hear him murmur his " Nunc Dimittis," as he rests in his old arm-chair.

Not sad or lonely is the old man's heart,
Neither doth he sigh as the days pass o'er him ;
In the many long years he hath learnt to part
From those who were callèd away before him.

Now he is waiting till he hear the call,
Standing expectant by the silent river ;
He doth not tremble at its misty pall,
He looketh forward for ever and for ever.

He smiles and listens to the Christmas chime,
He smiles and listens to the Christmas carol,
He smiles and prays for the coming time,
When angels shall sing in their bright apparel.





THE DOCTOR'S HOUSE.



A SPIRIT came in who had been at the parish doctor's, a house at the end of the village street, with a neat lawn before it, and a little surgery on one side of it, with a separate entrance-gate ; and in this house the holly spirit had seen and heard a great deal in the Christmas season ; the doctor himself had stopped his gig, and, producing a large clasp-knife, had cut the spray off and put it into the gig on his way home. But though his house was but two miles distant, he was a good while getting to it ; he had to stop to see a poor woman who would probably not live to see that next Christmas day ; and he sat by her bedside longer than usual to speak to her, and *cheer up* her weeping friends ; and when he

did come out into the dark (for evening had closed in), it was in vain he tried to get up into his gig ; some three or four mothers were sure that their children were " dreadful bad ; " it seemed as if the juvenile population was having the customary Christmas ailments by anticipation ; and though these cases had been made the most of, and only wanted a little physic of probably a very innocent nature to satisfy physic-administering-delighting parents, yet the time occupied in seeing them made him later than usual ; to add to his disgust, the old horse, who had been a long round, would go as slowly as possible along the last mile ; he seemed utterly to forget that supper was waiting for him, or perhaps he too well remembered that he might very probably have to turn out again that night. Whatever his thoughts might be, his action, or rather want of action was very distasteful to his master ; " What an old rascal you are to serve me this trick, Christmas eve of all nights in the year ; is this the return you make me for having forgotten my whip to-day ? Ah ! ah ! my friend, you shall feel how sharp the stings of

ingratitude are," and with that he gently touched up the sluggard with the holly bough, which unaccustomed treatment sent him off along the road at such a rate as well nigh to make up for lost time. Leaving the horse to the man who was waiting for him, he took out the bough, and opening the front door stepped into the dark hall, directly another door was heard to open, and a rush came across the hall, followed by a sharp cry of pain, "Oh, Charles, for shame ; you've pricked my arms all over ; what a welcome to give your sister ! I shall want a bit of plaster on the end of my nose, and a patch on each cheek."

"Just like you, running headforemost into all sort of difficulties ; I suppose I may as well order old Bob out again, and drive to the station, to inquire for your lost luggage, as I had last time you came, but I am glad you have managed to bring yourself safely ; here I'll make over the holly to you, and you shall cut it up, and take your revenge on it ; but why in the world have they not lit the lamp ? I suppose, now you're here, nothing will be

done in usual way, but all higgledy piggledy, as old nurse used to say."

"Well, Charles, it *was* my fault to-night, we were so busy unpacking, and Mary never said she ought to go and light it. But you see I've met my punishment in hugging a prickly holly bush when I wanted to hug a snappish prickly old brother."

By this time they had talked each other into the drawing-room, and Lucy lit the lamp, and they took a long look at each other, the first after a year's separation, and they sat chatting of home till they went into dinner, after which they were about to return to the drawing-room, when Lucy said—

"I know you smoke, and as I am not your wife, why I can't venture to break pipes, and you'll be cross with me all the evening if I keep you here, for I know you wont smoke here, because you are afraid the smell of the smoke will hang in the curtains ever so long, till I know who comes to admire them ; so just give me a stool in your sanctum, and I'll sit at your feet, and you shall puff away to your heart's content, dear old Charley."

4

This amendment was carried nem. con., and soon they were busy over their home interests.

"Now, Charles, you have not asked me about Gertrude since I came into the house, and I know you are burning to know all about her, and that young curate who is so active visiting the poor."

"Conceited puppy!"

"No, he is'nt a conceited puppy, it is your blind jealousy, I see it all; he's so good and kind, he sat up three nights with a poor dying man."

"Better have paid a nurse."

"No, no, Charley, don't be cross."

And here Lucy began almost to cry, and whimpered—

"I did want you to like him."

"A pretty way you take, telling me that he is falling in love with Gertrude."

At this Lucy looked up very roguishly in his face, and said—

"Then, you don't think he ought to fall in love; you don't think clergymen ought to marry."

"*Lucy*, what is it all about? when you take

to plaguing, I've never any peace left; I've no doubt he is an excellent man, and sat up half a dozen nights with half a dozen old men, and didn't give them the wrong physic more than once, which proved once too often though, and he's welcome to make love to Gertrude, only he'll be sorry for it; for I fancy Gertrude won't have him."

"Well, now you are so gracious to him, I'll tell you a grand secret, but first you must give me your opinion of his personal appearance, and producing a little portrait, she half held it up, blushing fiery red."

Charles opened his eyes, and with a wise look, said—

"Oh! oh! Miss Lucy, that is the way the wind blows; pray what am I to do for a house-keeper? I had once a sister, Lucy, who was always learning wonderful mysteries of cooking, because Charles would want a housekeeper, and now she is taking all that vast stock of learning and is going to endow the church with it. Well, there's one comfort, it will be good for my trade, for you'll be sure to make him ill with some nastiness, though I

should think it would only be once ; he looks a man who wouldn't stand nonsense ; he'd want the hall lamp lit every night, for instance."

"Well, any how," quoth Lucy, "if he did appoint a penance for neglect of duty, he'd scarcely think of making me kiss a holly bush."

"Well, Lucy, let me give you a kiss, little woman ; may you be happy. I suppose I must try and find another housekeeper."

"Of course you must. Now I can recommend you one, very careful, used to teasing ; let me see, I think I can shew you what she is like ; look here."

"Well done, Lucy ; how did you get this taken, such a good one too ; Gertrude looking her best ?"

"Come, Sir, give it back to me ; I asked her for it for myself as her particular friend, and really Charles, you oughtn't to keep it. I declare, if you do, I'll write and tell her."

"Agreed, Lucy, you shall write to-morrow, and enclose it in my letter."

"You don't mean, Charles, you *are* going to write ?"

"Yes, indeed I do."

"Oh, I am so happy, for I should like her for a sister, you may keep the picture to-night, just to dream on, you know, but you must ask leave before I let you keep it for good."

Thus the evening passed in home-talk and chatter, and both went to bed, looking forward to a merry Christmas.

The next morning when Lucy came down, she heard that Charles had gone out to see a patient, but would be in soon. So she waited for him, and when he came, scolded him merrily for his unpunctual ways, all which, said she, however lawful in an old bachelor, must now be reformed. Charles told her that he should have to go out again before church, and perhaps should not be able to go to church at all; but should, if possible, come in before the service was over: and soon afterwards, taking his little portable writing desk in his pocket, set off again to see his patient. It was a case which required watching; his absence at the crisis might prove fatal to the patient, and at the best, there was but small

hope; and so he saw when he re-entered the sickchamber, the short time during which he had been away had wrought a great change,—death was written in the eye. The patient was fully sensible and cheerful, and, as the doctor, touched his pale hand, said—

“I can’t *shake* hands, doctor, but I wish you a merry Christmas, and many of them. Mine is a happy one, though it may not seem so.”

“Look, Willie,” said Charles, “I’ve brought you a sprig of holly, I cut it last night from the big bush near the road under the hill, you know it, I dare say.”

“Oh yes, oh yes; very well.

“Well this year it is splendid, or at least was, but most of the best boughs are cut off, it’s a great pity I always think.

“Why a pity, doctor? No, no, it’s no pity, it is right. ‘Cut down as the grass, withered even as the green herb.’ The holly berries were made to feed the hungry birds and to please man’s eye, and to make him rejoice at Christmas time; and you only used them for what they were intended, just like *us*, doctor. Some men might say of me,

what a pity to see a young man cut off in his youth, he might have done so much if he had been spared. But I know it's for the best; and though I did enjoy life when I could, yet I enjoy death—yes, doctor, enjoy death. It doesn't hurt me to talk, does it, if I do it gently? Well, then, I should like to talk with you, because we're both young men, and you can feel with me. I've seen you play cricket, I've seen you ride, I know you enjoy life—don't you, doctor? aye, as much as I did, and do now. That day last winter when my father put you on the young horse to ride after the hounds, I saw how you enjoyed it. It wasn't the first time you'd ridden by a great many. How I remember your taking the brook; we thought he'd be sure to swerve, being but a colt, and not used to jump water; but you held his head so firmly, yet so lightly, that he could n't help going over it. Oh, yes, you enjoy life. Well, then, let me talk a little of life; perhaps I understand it better than you do, now I am going to leave it. You mix up the future with the present, as I did last year, but I look upon

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it as all past. Now, doctor, it strikes me that the only answer to the question, 'What is life for?' is, to do our duty, to live as long as God lets us in such a way that we may be ready to die when he calls us. All this might be put in longer words, but this is short, and I must be short now. Well, then, my notion is this, that a man should first consider whether it is wrong or very unsuitable in him to do this or that; if he sees it is let him avoid it, if he sees it is not let him do it with all his might. Why should many amusements be called wrong—they are not wrong unless men make them so, and they'll get worse and worse until they are reformed by those who understand them. There are many very good persons who have never been at a race, or a ball, or a hunt, or a card party, and yet who think it their duty to protest against them because they feel that there is *danger* in all these things. But it strikes me that they don't do half as much good as when a man who does know all about races, and balls, and hunts, and cards, shows by his own life that the two things need *not be opposite*. The harm is that racing men

will waste their money foolishly and *will* cheat ; that hunting men *will* swear (though they don't do that as they did) ; that women *will* turn night into day beyond all reason ; and that card-sharpers are found at tables where honest gentlemen should be—who prefer the excitement of chance to the endurance of skill. People will see this some day. You may not see it, doctor ; but you'll help to bring on that day I know. Ah ! doctor ! doctor ! I'm stronger than you think, and shall soon be beyond the reach of your physic. Well, if I must take it I must ; and now I'll rest and close my eyes, and if you must watch by me, find some book and read to yourself. This is the pleasantest part of my life, for it's life and death all in one—it's heaven and earth. But, doctor, if I fall asleep there's one thing I would ask you to do, for I know you wish it yourself. Last night I took the sacrament—I wish you could have taken it with me as we often have in the old church ; but go and take it to-day, doctor ; don't mind leaving me ; and if I am awake I shall be praying with you ; and if I have fallen asleep I shall then know

even as I am known, and shall be looking upon the 'good time which is ever coming, coming, coming—' and which will come surely some day. 'It will surely come, it will not tarry.'"

And then the doctor took out his writing-case and wrote the words he had thought over the last night, only they took a more manly yet gentle form if possible, when he looked at that pale form—so strong in courage, so weak in body—who lay scarcely living, and yet much more alive than was he—much more full of real life; it was a curious place to chose for writing a proposal of marriage that chamber of the dying, and yet not unsuitable; and he finished his Christmas letter, and sat watching the dying man, till he saw the change was coming, and he called in his friends, and again the young man opened his eyes, and said to the doctor—"Doctor, I've seen it, that *good time*; you'll see it some day, farewell." And then, as they knelt around the bed, he whispered the old lines—

"Fear not, said he, for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind;



Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind."

"Good-bye, good-bye—a happy Christmas—a happy new year—the good time is coming, doctor, coming"—and to him it had come.

As the doctor and his sister walked home from church both were silent. She remembered having seen his friend Willie last year, when he was full of life and spirits, and the blow struck her even more than it did her brother, for she had not seen the peaceful passage from death into life, she had only thought of the strong young man, "in the morning green and growing up, in the evening cut down, dried up, and withered."

In due course the answer came to the letter, and was satisfactory, insomuch that when Lucy pompously demanded the restitution of her friend's portrait, she was answered that the young curate had sent a dispensation to steal on this occasion, which message of the curate was a myth I believe, and so did Lucy. On one bright frosty day Charles asked his sister to come with him in the gig when he went his

round, and taking her by roads which she had not travelled last year, kept her continually interested, and they met the curate (not Lucy's curate, but our older acquaintance the Navvy's friend), and he told Charles about his adventure, and they agreed that the navvies were very good sort of people, if managed properly; but that they were independent, ignorant, and inclined to look upon parsons as their natural enemies. He moreover recommended Charles to drive down to the settlement, both that his sister might see the works, and that he might see a sick child. And as the curate was a trusty aide-de-camp, who didn't send him to look after every cut finger or toothache, he determined to go, and found our friend John much more inclined to be civil at first sight to him than he had been to the parson. After examining the child, and ordering proper remedies, John asked what his charge was, and Charles at once named a fair fee, for he saw that John was one of those men who liked to pay their way and be beholden to no man. Then John asked if the young *lady* would like to see the works farther up,

for he'd go with her. His mates were roughish in their ways sometimes to strangers, but would be civil enough to *his* friends. So Lucy, having her brother with her, plucked up courage to venture in amongst the gaunt, bearded men, and was met with a rough courtesy she had not expected—men, with but very little idea of right or wrong, laying their broad shovels down for her to step on in muddy places, and taking her thanks with an ease which astonished her as much as her own ease in speaking to them. And Charles saw in these men the germ of one of the cohorts who should bring in the “good time” in triumph. They wanted but to be treated as men to become noble specimens of manhood. Ah! when the chivalry of the “good times” is renewed, these men will become soldiers in the great tourney—not for glory, not for wealth, but honour and virtue. Live happy, doctor! I know you will come next year and cut off one of my bright boughs; but when you get home you will find the lamp lighted, and Gertrude will be too wise to kiss the holly when she can see to kiss the bearer of it.



THE SOLITARY.

THE spirit that came next had but a sad tale to tell. No merry Christmas had it seen. Its spray had been taken up on the joint of meat to the table of an old bachelor, but he gave a pshaw! and threw the "rubbish" into the coal box; and the meal was over soon, for he ate quickly and carelessly; and drawing his arm chair to the fire, sat down, and his eye fell on me, and picking me out of the coal box, he stuck me before him on the chimney-piece, but not in love, but simply to mock and jeer at me, and the past years came one by one around, and in the gloomy room I saw the faint images pass. The first was long, long ago—a well lighted *room*, and a merry company, all young men,

laughing and joking together—and he was new to it all, and was shy and bashful, and then cards were brought out, and they let him win, and he grew flushed with success and drink, and played yet more deeply—it was the old story very often told, and which will be told to the end of the world


Then I saw a country lane in the bright summer, and he was walking with a village girl, and whispering love to her, and she believed it all, and clung to him, and promised to leave all her friends if he would marry her up in London, and then they would always be happy. Ah! “Love’s young dream.” And then I saw them in London, and she was so finely dressed and looked happy, for he was very kind, but there was no little gold hoop on her finger—he was putting her off with kind and hollow words. And next there was noisy company there, and company she shrank from, and he was speaking softly to some one else, and seemed to be laughing at her, and a stranger came and spoke to her, and grew more attentive, and her old love less attentive; and I saw that this vision was passing through the old

bachelor's mind, for he thought of the village girl whom he had left to ruin, and a cry seemed to arise, "dead, dead, dead"—"one more unfortunate gone to her death."

And next I saw him with blood on his hands, and one who but yesterday had been his friend lay before him, cold and gone to judgment—slain in a duel.

But the darkest was yet to come, and over it the poor lonely hard-faced man thought and thought—and grew more stern and more hopeless. There was one whom he *did* love—with all his heart, honestly—a fair young creature, and he had not feared to seek to join her clear bright nature to his, so dark and foul, and she had loved him ; yet neither had spoken of love—it was felt, understood. And one day some one told her of one to whom he had offered marriage, of one who was dying of that hope deferred ; and thus was he playing with human hearts, and she avoided him, and the years passed on, and she married and thought he had forgotten her ; but again they met oftener and oftener, till she remembered that *the world* would judge her and shew no pity,

and she drew back ; but it was too late, he had accomplished his aim, he had taken away her name, and he let her—the innocent—go forth as guilty, when a word of his might have saved her—had he no dark dreams then, that lone man ? Ah yes ; on that Christmas night he fed on ashes, and the spirit of the holly found no Christmas mirth, no Christmas hope, no Christmas love there. The carol singers had given up coming to his door, they had been told they were not wanted, nay, he had threatened to set loose the house dog at them if they came howling to his premises again, and he sat in silence and pain, and the servant came in and said, “ Please, sir, here’s a person wants to see you very particularly indeed ; ” and he, without thinking, ordered the servant to send him (as he thought) in to him, and the door was shut. Surprised at the silence, and thinking it was only some man on business, he said, sharply, “ Well, what do you want ? ” and hearing a bitter sigh, he turned round suddenly, started up and said, “ What brings *you* here to haunt me ?—begone.” But the lady said, “ I *must* speak




to you, Mr. Brown, I am staying near here with well nigh the only friend you have left me, and I come to ask for justice ; you will not answer my letters. I come to you on Christmas night, when there should be goodwill ; speak the word of truth but to *one* man ; he still would take me back if he knew I was innocent. Oh, what have I done to you that you thus pursue me with this undying hate. I know now you never did love me, else you would not so hate me now. Oh, man, man, be merciful, be just ; I adjure you by the living and just God, who will hear me if you will not."

" Woman, you say I never loved you, it is false ; you say I hate you, it is true—I do hate you ; and I can take my revenge on you, and I will. No word of mine shall ever save you. Look here!"—and going to his desk he produced some papers—"here are the evidences of your innocence—produce them, and every court of justice will pronounce you innocent. Here they are, look at them. But you shall never touch them—never see them more," *and he threw them into the fire.* She did not

faint, she did not groan, but stood very upright—very white—very calm.

“ You are strong, but I am stronger ; you curse me, I will *not* curse you ; you will not forgive me, I will forgive you. Unhappy man, you will be wretched, but it is your own seeking. May God forgive you, as I do. I would not change places with you, though I am but a weak, sorrowing woman. You shall see me again no more—hear of me no more. You cannot now do me justice if you desired it,” and calmly, as if in a trance, she passed out of the room, and he heard the carriage wheels grinding the gravel outside, and then all was still ; and the fire burnt low, and he looked at the embers as though he would tear out the papers which had burned, but it was too late, too late—sin on sin—woe on woe, and he seized a burning ember and squeezed it to pieces in his bare hand, as though it were a cold clod of the field, and laughed at the pain. And I heard him say, “ I will live one hour more, and then I will die—it is better than life, it is destruction ;” and he took a pistol and laid it on the table before him, and his watch beside



it, and sat without moving a muscle—without seeming to feel the pain of his black burnt hand. And again the spectres past before him, and one by one they mocked him, and were gone, and the hour was over, and with a flash and report, the wretched man had ceased to live; and the world around him was rejoicing, while he lay dead, for the very servant had not heard the report of the pistol, and there he lay till next morning, with his right hand all black and burnt, grasping the pistol; and in cottage homes many dark stories were told of him, as his body lay in an unknown grave in the churchyard, for no one put a memorial stone above him.





CONCLUSION.



WHEN Christmas bells have ceased to ring,
And warmer gales bright blossoms bring ;
 When snow and frost,
 Melted and lost,
Give place to the bluebell and red dog-rose ;
 When the birds on the hill,
 And the sparkling rill,
Sing loudly of summer ; and Nature grows
Daily more full of life and song,
Let thought of Christmas banish wrong ;
 Be the heart ever warm,
 The lips ever mild,
Till each gains the form
 Of a little child,

Gentle and pure as He who lay
Midst the beasts in their stalls on Christ
mas-day,
So many hundred years ago,
That He might share our life—our wo
That He might see us live in love,
That we might win a home above.



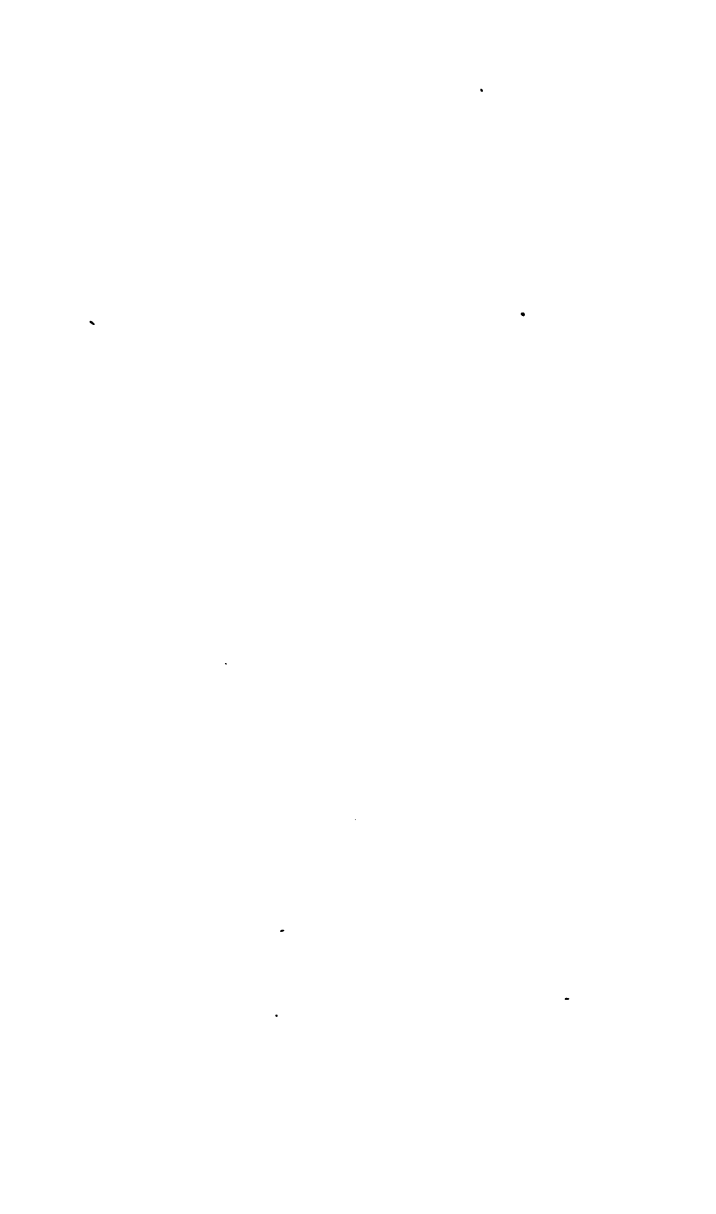


FAREWELL.



Now, little book, farewell, and speed
Thy way—where'er thy way may be.
I know not who shall see or read,
Who shall despise—who value thee ;
Content am I if wise men stay
Their hands, nor cast thee quite aside.
Happy if those who read can say—
“'T is a fit book for Christmastide ;”
Most blest if some poor sorrowing heart,
Feeling a chord of joy or grief
Touched, shall, in whole or part
Of thee, find pleasure or relief.









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